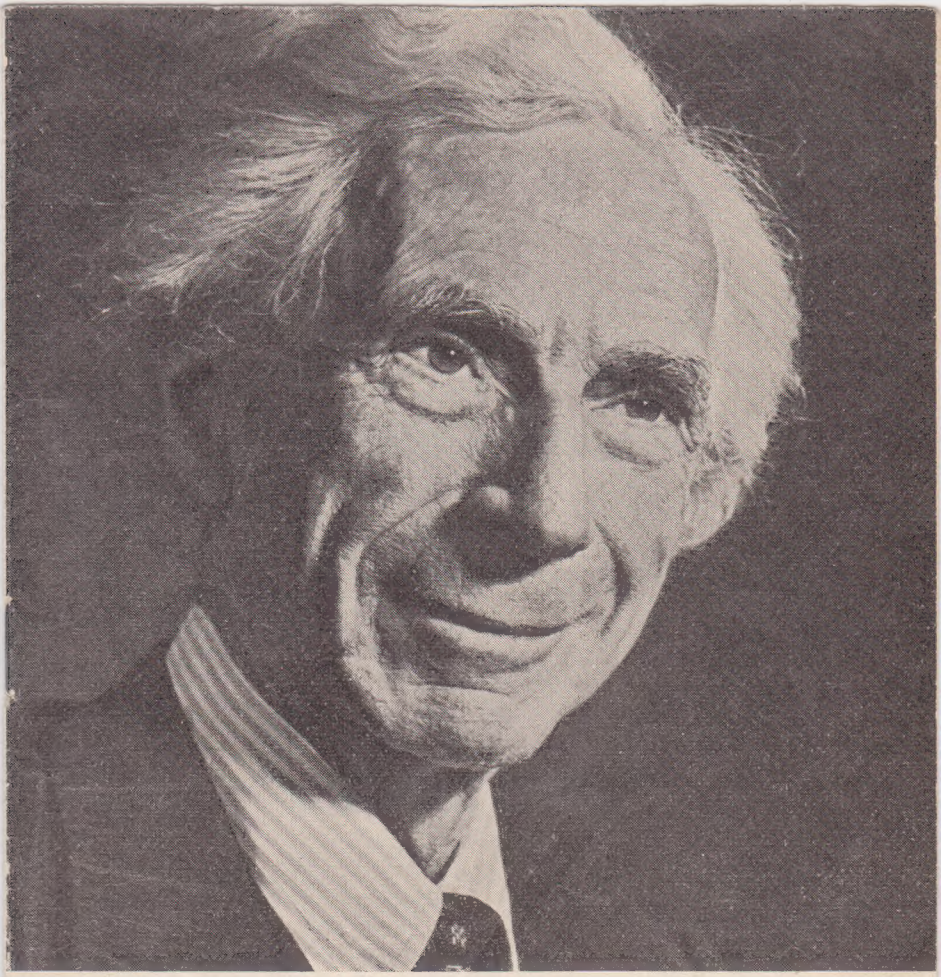

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BERTRAND RUSSELL, OM

THE FAITH OF A RATIONALIST

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By BERTRAND RUSSELL, OM

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THE FAITH OF A RATIONALIST

WHEN I try to discover what are the original sources of my opinions, both practical and theoretical, I find that most of them spring ultimately from admiration for two qualities—kindly feeling and veracity. To begin with kindly feeling: most of the social and political evils of the world arise through absence of sympathy and presence of hatred, envy, or fear. Hostile feelings of this sort are common between nations; at many times they have existed between different classes or different creeds within one nation; in many professions envy is an obstacle to the recognition of superior merit; hatred of Jews, oppression of Negroes, contempt for all who are not white, have brought and are bringing great suffering to would-be oppressors as well as to those whom they have sought to oppress. Every kind of hostile action or feeling provokes a reaction by which it is increased and so generates a progeny of violence and injustice which has a terrible vitality. This can only be met by cultivating in ourselves and attempting to generate in the young feelings of friendliness rather than hostility, of well-wishing rather than malevolence, and of co-operation rather than competition.

VERACITY AND KINDLY FEELING

If I am asked "Why do you believe this?" I should not appeal to any supernatural authority, but only to the general wish for happiness. A world full of hate is a world full of sorrow. Each party, where there is mutual hatred, hopes that only the other party will suffer, but this is seldom the case. And even the most successful oppressors are filled with fear—slave-owners, for example, have been obsessed with dread of a servile insurrection. From the point of view of worldly wisdom, hostile feeling and limitation of sympathy are folly. Their fruits are war, death, oppression, and torture, not only for their original victims but, in the long run, also for their perpetrators or their descendants. Whereas if we could all learn to love our neighbours the world would quickly become a paradise for us all.

Veracity, which I regard as second only to kindly feeling,

consists broadly in believing according to evidence and not because a belief is comfortable or a source of pleasure. In the absence of veracity, kindly feeling will often be defeated by self-deception. It used to be common for the rich to maintain either that it is pleasant to be poor or that poverty is the result of shiftlessness. Some healthy people maintain that all illness is self-indulgence. I have heard fox-hunters argue that the fox likes being hunted. It is very easy for those who have exceptional power to persuade themselves that the system by which they profit gives more happiness to the under-dog than he would enjoy under a more just system. And, even where no obvious bias is involved, it is only by means of veracity that we can acquire the scientific knowledge required to bring about our common purposes. Consider how many cherished prejudices had to be abandoned in the development of modern medicine and hygiene. To take a different kind of illustration: how many wars would have been prevented if the side which was ultimately defeated had formed a just estimate of its prospects instead of one based on conceit and wish-fulfilment!

BELIEVING WITHOUT PROOF

Veracity, or love of truth, is defined by Locke as "not entertaining any proposition with greater assurance than the proofs it is built upon will warrant." This definition is admirable in regard to all those matters as to which proof may reasonably be demanded. But since proofs need premises, it is impossible to prove anything unless some things are accepted without proof. We must therefore ask ourselves: What sort of thing is it reasonable to believe without proof? I should reply: The facts of sense-experience and the principles of mathematics and logic—including the inductive logic employed in science. These are things which we can hardly bring ourselves to doubt and as to which there is a large measure of agreement among mankind. But in matters as to which men disagree, or as to which our own convictions are wavering, we should look for proofs, or, if proofs cannot be found, we should be content to confess ignorance.

There are some who hold that veracity should have limitations. Some beliefs, they say, are both comforting and morally beneficial, although it cannot be said that there are valid scientific

grounds for supposing them to be true; these beliefs, they say, should not be critically examined. I cannot myself admit any such doctrine. I cannot believe that mankind can be the better for shrinking from the examination of this or that question. No sound morality can need to be based upon evasion, and a happiness derived from beliefs not justified on any ground except their pleasantness is not a kind of happiness that can be unreservedly admired.

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND THE UNIVERSE

These considerations apply especially to religious beliefs. Most of us have been brought up to believe that the universe owes its existence to an all-wise and all-powerful Creator, whose purposes are beneficent even in what to us may seem evil. I do not think it is right to refuse to apply to this belief the kind of tests that we should apply to one that touches our emotions less intimately and profoundly. Is there any evidence of the existence of such a Being? Undoubtedly belief in Him is comforting and sometimes has some good moral effects on character and behaviour. But this is no evidence that the belief is true. For my part, I think the belief lost whatever rationality it once possessed when it was discovered that the earth is not the centre of the universe. So long as it was thought that the sun and the planets and the stars revolved about the earth, it was natural to suppose that the universe had a purpose connected with the earth, and, since man was what man most admired on the earth, this purpose was supposed to be embodied in man. But astronomy and geology have changed all this. The earth is a minor planet of a minor star which is one of many millions of stars in a galaxy which is one of many millions of galaxies. Even within the life of our own planet man is only a brief interlude. Non-human life existed for countless ages before man was evolved. Man, even if he does not commit scientific suicide, will perish ultimately through failure of water or air or warmth. It is difficult to believe that Omnipotence needed so vast a setting for so small and transitory a result.

Apart from the minuteness and brevity of the human species, I cannot feel that it is a worthy climax to such an enormous prelude. There is a rather repulsive smugness and self-com-

placency in the argument that man is so splendid as to be evidence of infinite wisdom and infinite power in his Creator. Those who use this kind of reasoning always try to concentrate our attention on the few saints and sages; they try to make us forget the Neros and Attilas and Hitlers and the millions of mean poltroons to whom such men owed their power. And even what is best in us is apt to lead to disaster. Religions that teach brotherly love have been used as an excuse for persecution, and our profoundest scientific insight is made into a means of mass destruction. I can imagine a sardonic demon producing us for his amusement, but I cannot attribute to a Being who is wise, beneficent, and omnipotent the terrible weight of cruelty, suffering, and ironic degradation of what is best that has marred the history of man in increasing measure as he has become more master of his fate.

A PLAUSIBLE CONJECTURE

There is a different and vaguer conception of cosmic Purpose as not omnipotent but slowly working its way through a recalcitrant material. This is a more plausible conception than that of a God who, though omnipotent and loving, has deliberately produced beings so subject to suffering and cruelty as the majority of mankind. I do not pretend to know that there is no such Purpose; my knowledge of the universe is too limited. But I do say, and I say with confidence, that the knowledge of other human beings is also limited, and that no one can adduce any good evidence that cosmic processes have any purpose whatever. Our very inadequate evidence, so far as it goes, tends in the opposite direction. It seems to show that energy is being more and more evenly distributed, while everything to which it is possible to attribute value depends upon uneven distribution. In the end, therefore, we should expect a dull uniformity, in which the universe would continue for ever and ever without the occurrence of anything in the slightest degree interesting. I do not say that this will happen; I say only that, on the basis of our present knowledge, it is the most plausible conjecture.

Immortality, if we could believe in it, would enable us to shake off this gloom about the physical world. We should say that although our souls, during their sojourn here on earth, are

in bondage to matter and physical laws, they pass at death into an eternal world beyond the empire of decay which science seems to reveal in the sensible world. But it is impossible to believe this unless we think that a human being consists of two parts—soul and body—which are separable and can continue independently of each other. Unfortunately all the evidence is against this. The mind grows like the body; like the body it inherits characteristics from both parents; it is affected by diseases of the body and by drugs; it is intimately connected with the brain. There is no scientific reason to suppose that after death the mind or soul acquires an independence of the brain which it never had in life. I do not pretend that this argument is conclusive, but it is all that we have to go upon except the slender evidence supplied by psychical research.

HAPPINESS THROUGH KINDNESS

Many people fear that, without the theoretical beliefs that I find myself compelled to reject, the ethical beliefs which I accept could not survive. They point to the growth of cruel systems opposed to Christianity. But these systems, which grew up in a Christian atmosphere, could never have grown up if either kindly feeling or veracity had been practised; they are evil myths, inspired by hate and without scientific support. Men tend to have the beliefs that suit their passions. Cruel men believe in a cruel God and use their belief to excuse their cruelty. Only kindly men believe in a kindly God, and they would be kindly in any case. The reasons for the ethic that, in common with many whose beliefs are more orthodox, I wish to see prevail are reasons derived from the course of events in this world. We have seen a great system of cruel falsehood, the Nazi system, lead a nation to disaster at immense cost to its opponents. It is not by such systems that happiness is to be achieved; even without the help of revelation it is not difficult to see that human welfare requires a less ferocious ethic. More and more people are becoming unable to accept traditional beliefs. If they think that, apart from these beliefs, there is no reason for kindly behaviour the results may be needlessly unfortunate. That is why it is important to show that no supernatural reasons are needed to make men kind and to prove that only through kindness can the human race achieve happiness.

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There is a danger that the clock may be put back. Many of the gains which reformers in the earlier part of the century believed to be permanent are now threatened. Men of goodwill should give their support to a movement which defends liberal ideals in this present crisis of civilization from new and insidious attacks.

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